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Articles in Today's Clips

Friday, July 21, 2006

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New Effort To Protect Kids Coming

MIRS, Thursday, July 20, 2006

Look for a joint announcement next week from the Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM** administration aimed at beefing up the state's efforts to protect abused children. The Department of Human Services (DHS) is partnering with the Michigan State Police (MSP) and local prosecutors to increase the investigations into those cases around the state.

This comes on the heels of a report last week from Oakland County suggesting it was time to establish a separate entity to do the investigations, thus taking it out of the hands of the DHS.

DHS Director Marianne **UDOW**, responding for the first time to the suggestion of Oakland County Judge Jim **ALEXANDER**, said she is not ready to embrace that concept.

She said she believes everything should remain under her umbrella because there is better coordination between all the divisions that deal with these children. She said she believes that splitting off the investigatory arm has not worked in other states where that has been tried. Instead, these efforts have proven "very costly and very complex."

She argued that strengthening the working relationship with the police and prosecutors would result in protecting more children. She also indicated that 51 new child protective service employees are already in training as a result of a budget supplemental approved by the Legislature and signed by the governor.

Dad accused of beating son

Police say he dragged naked teen down street

Friday, July 21, 2006

By Scott Hagen
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A Jackson man whipped his naked 14-year-old son with a leather belt while he led him by the wrist up and down a Jackson street, police and prosecutors say.

Prosecutors issued an arrest warrant Thursday for the 34-year-old father after the incident Wednesday night. He faces one charge of second-degree child abuse and one charge of felonious assault.

"This certainly is not a healthy environment to raise a child," said Jackson police Deputy Chief Matt Heins. "It is beyond all reasonable comprehension of the appropriate level of discipline."

The Citizen Patriot generally does not identify victims of child abuse; the father's name is not being used, to protect the son's identity.

The father apparently became enraged when he thought his son was allowing relatives into their house in the 400 block of High Street to have sex, a police report said.

The father marched down the block to get his son, who was at a friend's house. The father yelled at him, but the son said he didn't know what he was talking about, the report said.

When they returned to the house, the father took off his 2-inch thick leather belt and started striking the teen, the report said. The father then ordered his son to strip off all his clothes or face further beatings, police said.

The father then led the teen by the wrist up High Street about 9:30 p.m., when it was still light out. The son told police he was embarrassed. Numerous cars drove by honking and neighbors mocked him as friends looked on, the son told police.

The son complied because he didn't want to be hit with the belt anymore, he told police.

Once they returned to the house, the son was forced to sit on the porch for 20 minutes, still naked. He eventually grabbed his clothes, dressed and made it to his mother's house on Van Buren Street. She called police.

A police officer observed five large welts on the teen's back and arm.

The mother also told police that the father called her and said he was going to "beat the hell" out of the child. Police notified Children's Protective Services.

The father is expected to be arraigned today in District Court.

"The allegations in this case are shocking and will be taken very seriously by this office," Chief Assistant Prosecutor Mark Blumer said.

METRO DETROIT

Mom told to take baby's ashes away

Judge: Remains don't belong at trial

July 21, 2006

BY JOE SWICKARD
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A white plush teddy bear containing the ashes of a slain little girl will be sequestered during her father's murder trial in Wayne County Circuit Court.

Judge Timothy Kenny ruled that Lori Lemons cannot bring the bear with the remains of her 2 1/2-month-old daughter NaKita into the courtroom where her husband, Milton Lee Lemons, 32, faces first-degree murder charges.

"I acted on my own motion," Kenny said Thursday. "I thought the teddy bear was entirely inappropriate. To me, it just boiled down to the notion that some things don't belong in a courtroom, and bringing the ashes of the deceased into a trial is one of them."

Saying only, "I don't want to mess up the case," Lori Lemons declined to comment on Kenny's order. Milton Lee Lemons' lawyer, David Cripps, was in trial Thursday and could not be reached for comment. Assistant Prosecutor Michael Woodyard did not object to keeping the bear outside the courtroom.

Lori Lemons bought the 14-inch bear to memorialize her daughter, who died Oct. 11.

Milton Lee Lemons is accused of fatally shaking NaKita at the couple's Wayne apartment the day before.

The bear contains the girl's remains.

Kenny said that a trial focused on the death of an infant is emotional enough without bringing a memorial into the courtroom that could influence a jury.

The jury trial is scheduled to start Aug. 2 at the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice in Detroit.

If convicted, Lemons faces a mandatory sentence of life in prison without parole.

A prosecutor and judge for about 30 years, Kenny said such visible symbols and memorials are a fairly recent development at criminal trials. In the past, he said, a high profile case might have seen picketing and leafleting or people standing vigil, but that was outside the courthouse.

"I noticed in the past four years or so, that friends and relatives coming in wearing T-shirts with pictures of the deceased," he said. "And I had to deal with that issue in the trial of Officer Krupinski."

Detroit Police Officer David Krupinski was acquitted of manslaughter in 2001 in the fatal shooting of Earl Shaw Sr., a deaf man who allegedly was menacing police with a rake.

"People showed up wearing T-shirts with a picture of Mr. Shaw, and police officers were coming in uniform," Kenny said. "I ruled that there would be no T-shirts with images or writing and that officers attending the trial as spectators had to be in plain clothes."

"A jury has to decide a case on the facts and evidence and the law," he said. "It shouldn't be influenced by which side has the biggest number of supporters or most moving memorial."

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Amber Alert Canceled For Local Boy

POSTED: 7:27 pm EDT July 20, 2006

An Amber Alert for a 4-year-old boy in Detroit has been canceled. Police said the boy's 18-year-old mother took him because she was just told she was losing custody of him. She returned the boy sometime overnight. The boy is now in the custody of child protective services.

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Man arrested in Internet sex sting

Friday, July 21, 2006

A 24-year-old Linden man was arrested in Livingston County on Thursday on suspicion of soliciting sex from a minor on the Internet.

The man was arrested in Genoa Township near Brighton after he traveled to meet a 14-year-old girl he had been communicating with on the Internet for about two weeks, said Todd Luzod, a lieutenant with the Livingston County Sheriff's Department. The man had arranged the meeting for sexual purposes, Luzod said. Instead, the man was communicating with an undercover Livingston County Sheriff's detective from the Michigan State Police Internet Crimes Against Children Unit.

The identity of the man was not released, and he is held in the county jail awaiting arraignment. The sheriff is seeking two felony charges against him.

List of convicted school workers is released

July 21, 2006

BY CHASTITY PRATT AND PEGGY WALSH-SARNECKI
FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITERS

The Michigan Department of Education released a list of 193 public school employees Thursday who have been convicted of misdemeanors that could cost them their jobs. Nearly all of the fireable offenses involved assault, battery or domestic violence and go back as far as the 1960s. The list, released to the Free Press under the Freedom of Information Act, includes one conviction for criminal sexual conduct and three for child abuse.

Two of those four most serious offenses were committed by maintenance employees for the Grand Rapids Public Schools -- a 1989 conviction for fourth-degree misdemeanor criminal sexual conduct and a 2005 conviction for fourth-degree misdemeanor child abuse.

Ann Arbor and Detroit had employees with the other two misdemeanor child abuse convictions.

Under state laws that took effect in January, any school employee with a sex offense conviction must be fired. Superintendents or school boards may decide whether to take action against employees convicted of other misdemeanors. The changes went into effect this year to rid schools of known sex offenders and pedophiles.

Carol Summers, grandparent of a kindergartner at Beckham Academy in the Detroit Public Schools, said the law makes sense.

"Those with serious misdemeanors should not be working around our children," she said Thursday.

But the Ann Arbor Public Schools, which had six employees with fireable misdemeanor convictions, decided not to fire the custodian who had a 2005 conviction of fourth-degree child abuse. The worker was not considered a threat to students, school officials said.

"The majority of these employees have been very strong employees of the district, had come in and talked very openly," said Liz Margolis, a spokeswoman for the district.

"These people have paid their dues to society."

School districts run background checks before hiring workers, but now employers also will be required to run new checks to see whether workers committed crimes after they were hired. Workers must get fingerprinted by July 2008.

Bob Galardi, deputy superintendent of Ann Arbor Public Schools, said that the fingerprinting of 3,000 employees could cost Ann Arbor schools as much as \$250,000.

"Doing something like this is not all bad. But when you end up having your human resources person interviewing shoplifters on convictions that are old, it's a waste of time. But if we found one person, one of those sexual predators, how can I say it isn't useful?"

Contact CHASTITY PRATT at 313-223-4537 or cpratt@freepress.com Education writer Lori Higgins contributed to this report.

Board votes to let bus driver with felony retain job

Friday, July 21, 2006

By Chad Livengood
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A Jackson Public Schools bus driver whose prior felony convictions surfaced recently will get to keep her job of 16 years.

Sheree Sarata's name showed up a few weeks ago on the state's list of felons employed in Michigan schools. Hired in September 1990, Sarata was convicted in December 1991 of felony forgery and second-degree retail fraud. She served 3 1/2 years probation.

The Jackson School Board met in closed session on Thursday to decide Sarata's fate. The board voted 5-0 to keep her employed. Board members Bobby Thompkins and Sheila Patterson were absent.

The board found Sarata to be an "exemplary employee" with a clean record since her conviction 15 years ago, said board President David Halsey.

"We believe she's an employee we want to keep in our district," Superintendent Dan Evans said.

This was the second such deliberation regarding employees on the felons list. On June 5, the board decided to allow the other four current JPS employees with prior felonies to continue working.

Transportation Supervisor Craig Frazier wrote June 6 to Debra Jackson, executive director of human resources, defending Sarata's continued employment.

School officials knew of Sarata's legal troubles at the time and transferred her to a custodial position during court proceedings, Frazier said.

JPS later let her return to driving a bus on "probation," said Frazier, who was her union representative at the time as president of the Jackson Education Support Personnel Association.

"Since this unfortunate situation, Sheree has transformed her life. She is an example of an outstanding employee," Frazier wrote.

The Jackson Citizen Patriot obtained the document and reviewed Sarata's personnel file under a Freedom of Information Act request.

State lawmakers mandated background checks on all 200,000 public school employees in Michigan. The Michigan State Police churned up over 450 convicted felons, including 10 in Jackson County and surrounding areas.

Frazier said he disagrees with lawmaker's decision to out only school employees.

"You're punishing people over and over again," he said.

Sarata could not be reached for comment. Her personnel file includes just one document making mention of her "criminal record."

Child support funds to be disbursed electronically

By ANDY HAMILTON / Niles Daily Star

Thursday, July 20, 2006 11:16 AM EDT

LANSING - Child support disbursements in Berrien County will soon be done electronically.

A plan involving the Department of Human Services' Office of Child Support and seven Friends of the Court offices in southern Michigan counties will begin disbursing some child support payments through a debit card beginning later this month.

"I think the number one reason (for the change) is, it is better for our customers because they have access to their money more quickly," said Marilyn Stephen, director of the Office of Child Support, which is part of the Michigan Department of Human Services.

The transition does not alter the way in which those responsible for paying child support make payments, Stephen said. A majority of the money collected from individuals paying child support is done so electronically, she added.

Of the \$1.3 billion of child support collected by the Office of Child Support, about 74 percent of that is done through income holding, she added. With income holding, employers automatically take child support from the payers' paychecks.

The new program for receiving child support is being introduced in a "rollout process." Forty-five Michigan counties have already made the switch to electronic disbursement and the remaining counties will phase in the program during 2006.

The program's pilot counties - Muskegon, Shiawassee and Marquette - adopted the plan in November 2005. Berrien, Cass, Saint Joseph, Van Buren, Branch, Hillsdale and Lenawee counties will implement the program starting Monday.

A new law - Public Act 548 of 2004 - requires all child support payments to be electronically disbursed via direct deposit into a personal checking or savings account or to a Visa debit card, unless recipients meet hardship exemption criteria.

The law is intended to provide immediate access to funds, eliminate mail delays and check-cashing fees, reduce the amount of money held by the state waiting for customer address updates and make more efficient use of taxpayer dollars.

"Because it's electronic, it happens faster than preparing a check and sending it through the mail. So, they have no more waiting for the mail to come," Stephen said.

Stephen added the new policy provides customers with a monthly statement from the card-issuing bank, U.S. Bank.

When a customer chooses the debit card, the Michigan State Disbursement Unit will deposit support payments directly to the card. The card can be used like any Visa-branded card, but only the Disbursement Unit can deposit money into the account.

The new Visa debit cards will be issued at no cost to the customer. Most transactions with the debit cards can be done without incurring any fees.

Stephen said there are three main ways to use the debit cards. First, the cards can work for "point of sale" transactions at places like grocery stores and gas stations that accept debit cards. The cardholder will also have the option of getting cash back without a charge.

Second, a debit cardholder can get cash by going to a bank or Interlink location that uses Visa. There are more than 29,000 Interlink merchants in Michigan.

Both the point of sale transactions and those handled at a bank can be completed free of charge, Stephen said.

The third option is using an ATM. Any ATM that accommodates Visa cards can be used, but Stephen said the owner of the machine might charge a small fee.

"Our customer base is pretty smart. We are seeing very few people using ATMs. So, they're not having to pay unnecessary fees," Stephen said.

Stephen said her office is strongly encouraging those receiving child support to choose the option of having the funds direct deposited into a checking or savings account.

"The reason for that is families that have bank accounts are therefore able to begin saving money and continue saving money," she said.

Notices have been sent to customers in the seven southwest Michigan counties who currently receive child support payments as paper checks in the mail. The notices give customers the choice of either direct deposit to their checking or savings account, or to a debit card.

Stephen said debit cards will begin showing up in mailboxes next week.

Mailing the debit cards has presented a small problem with the new program, Stephen said. Some customers who do not read the notices are shredding the debit card when it comes in the mail because they think it is a credit card.

Paper child support checks will no longer be sent out to customers unless they meet the

hardship exceptions described in the law. Stephen said about 100 people statewide so far have been exempt from using electronic disbursement.

Exemptions to the electronic disbursement may be granted for:

€ Individuals with a mental or physical disability that imposes a hardship.

€ Individuals with a language or literacy barrier that imposes a hardship.

€ Individuals with payments that are not recurring - two or less per year - or are not expected to continue in a 12-month period.

€ Individuals with both home and work addresses that are more than 30 miles from an ATM or their financial institution.

For more information on electronic disbursement of child support funds in Berrien County contact the Berrien County Friend of the Court at 684-5274 ext. 6299, or go to the child support section of the Department of Human Services Web site at www.michigan.gov/dhs or to www.misdu.com.

Lack of interpreters found to hurt patient care

July 21, 2006

BY ELIZABETH WEISE

USA TODAY

Many patients with a limited ability to speak English who need a translator in the nation's hospitals don't get one, according to an analysis published in Thursday's issue of the New England Journal of Medicine.

From 1990 to 2000, the number of residents with limited English proficiency grew by 7 million to 22 million, or 8.4% of the population, according to U.S. Census figures.

Yet, one study showed no interpreter was used in 46% of emergency department cases involving such patients, said Glenn Flores, author of the analysis and a nationally recognized expert on language barriers in health care.

"Lack of interpreters translates into impaired health status, lower likelihood of being given a follow-up appointment, greater risk of hospital admissions, more drug complications, longer medical visits and use of more resources," said Flores, a professor of pediatrics at the Medical College of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

He cites the case of a 7-year-old girl with an ear infection whose mother was told by a poorly trained interpreter to put the oral antibiotic in her daughter's ears.

In a case that cost a Florida hospital a \$71-million malpractice settlement, Flores said an 18-year-old who said he was "*intoxicado*," which can mean nauseated, spent 36 hours in a hospital being treated for a drug overdose before doctors realized that he had a brain aneurysm.

Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of national origin, the denial or delay of medical care because of language barriers is discrimination. Any medical facility that receives Medicaid or Medicare must provide language assistance to patients with limited English proficiency.

But the American Medical Association says making health care providers responsible for the cost of an interpreter is unfair.

An AMA survey found the cost of hiring an interpreter varied from \$30 to \$400 an hour depending on language and skill level, significantly higher than the payment for a Medicaid office visit, which in many states is from \$30 to \$50.

California has been at the forefront of the issue because of legislation passed in 2003 requiring that all health care providers make interpreters available to those who need them, said Cindy Ehnes, director of the California Department of Managed Health Care. Without communication, quality care is clearly "difficult if not impossible," Ehnes said.

LANGUAGES IN DEMAND

- Medical translators say the most common languages for which interpreters are needed are:

- Spanish

- Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin)

- Tagalog (Filipino)

- Vietnamese

- Korean

- Russian

Source: USA TODAY research

Lansing State Journal Letters

July 21, 2006

Back juvenile millage

As chief judge of the Ingham County Circuit Court, I have seen firsthand the positive benefits provided by the Juvenile Justice Millage. This millage, originally passed by the voters in 2002, is up for renewal on the Aug. 8 primary election ballot.

Pre-millage, my colleagues and I would have frequent discussions about the lack of sanctions for young offenders. A 24-bed juvenile detention center was woefully inadequate to treat more than 1,000 juvenile offenders who passed through the revolving doors of our court.

With the millage, we have added new treatment options for young offenders. They include beds at Camp Highfields and much needed group home space for young women. Our ability to provide adequate treatment for delinquent and disturbed young persons, and to protect the public, is vastly improved. Please don't turn back the clock.

Join me in voting in favor of the millage.

Judge William E. Collette
Lansing

Agency getting plenty of office help

Friday, July 21, 2006

By Martin Visser

MUSKEGON CHRONICLE NEWS SERVICE

Minor miracles happen every day in the Grand Haven offices of Love INC, and Executive Director Eric Morgan can prove it.

The 48-year old former Meijer executive reached into the top drawer of his battered desk recently and pulled out an invoice for \$5,900 from a local contractor. Along with it, he pulled out a check for \$5,900 donated by the same contractor. He reached into the drawer again and pulled out an invoice and check from another local contractor, this time for \$2,025 each.

"They made a donation equal to the amount of work they did, so it's free," Morgan said. "It's just incredible."

It doesn't stop there. Today, several employees from Shape Corp. were to unload office furniture into the newly renovated training room for the service agency also known as Love in the Name of Christ.

Meanwhile, Shape Corp. community relations manager Chuck Michele, of Spring Lake, and volunteer Stan Houck, of Ferrysburg, worked on landscaping.

Morgan has many such stories, and he's eager to tell them. The Grand Haven Love INC agency has seen a large increase in client volume over the past few years and, as a result, is expanding its offices at 1106 Fulton.

Donations from the community and a volunteer list that includes 25 office workers plus more than 200 people communitywide make it possible.

"Our volunteers are the best in the world," Morgan said.

The Grand Haven agency has been in its 3,000-square-foot commercial building near the intersection of Fulton and Ferry streets for about four years, but most work was done in two cramped offices.

Since May, to handle traffic and provide more confidentiality, the building has been transformed with three new offices, a training room, a kitchen area for volunteers and a handicapped-accessible bathroom. The aging brown brick exterior has had a facelift with new siding and white trim.

About the only thing that hasn't changed is the huge vegetable garden in the back of the building maintained by a group of home-schoolers.

Love INC was founded about 30 years ago by Holland resident Virgil Gulker, and it has more than 130 affiliates nationwide.

The Tri-Cities agency has 16 help ministries and provides up to \$1.7 million in services annually. The agency helps an average of 17 families a day and provides 1,000 meals in the form of groceries each month. Morgan said 95 cents out of every dollar donated to Love INC is returned to people in need in the Tri-Cities.

Love INC works with area churches to provide refurbished appliances, automobiles and other goods. Other services include a free laundry service and a group of men called Good Guys to help the elderly and others with handyman jobs. The agency usually interviews subjects to make sure they qualify for help, then taps the resources of the community and churches.

Pam Morgan, Eric's wife and a volunteer budget counselor, said on a recent day the agency helped move a single mom and a person just out of jail who needed food and a place to live.

The agency gets support from 40 of the 65 churches in the Tri-Cities, Morgan said, and other support from the community. Many churches refer members to Love INC for assistance the churches might not be equipped to handle, Morgan said.

"We've got people right here in our own community who are hungry and in need. You don't have to go overseas to find that," he said.

The director added it does not accept government or United Way money for its work.

The Tri-Cities office can be reached at (616) 846-2701 or on the Web at loveincnctricities.org.

July 20, 2006

OMNIBUS MOVES OUT OF CONFERENCE WITH SOME DEPTS. REMOVED

Five state departments, along with community colleges and higher education, will not be funded under the omnibus budget bill finalized by a conference committee on Thursday. The latest approval represents the last budget bill to move out of conference as lawmakers ready for a vote next week in both chambers.

Removed from the omnibus HB 5796 were the appropriations for the departments of Community Health, Corrections, Education, Environmental Quality and Natural Resources, whose 2006-07 budgets are covered under separate bills (SB 1083, SB 1084, SB 1085, SB 1086 and SB 1094) that were adopted by conference committees last week. The same is true for community colleges (SB 1082) and higher education (SB 1088).

But in the biggest change, the conferees added \$237.5 million (\$52.7 million in general funds) in supplemental appropriations for the current fiscal year, including an additional \$2.6 million for **juvenile care services**.

House Appropriations Chair Rep. Scott Hummel (R-DeWitt) said the money would be used to help the Department of Human Services help clients involved with the state's **foster care system**.

Other supplemental amounts include \$161.1 million (\$27.3 million in general funds) for DCH, with the largest portion being the \$116.4 million for hospital payments (no general funds) to bring the level up to the maximum possible for fiscal years 2004-2005 and 2005-2006.

Also included in the DCH supplemental is increased **Medicaid funding levels** (\$33.9 million overall with \$1.3 million in general funds), heightened appropriations for dental clinics operated by local health departments (\$9.8 million with no general fund dollars) and staff and resources related to implementing the newly-approved federal family planning waiver (\$957,000 with half coming from general fund dollars).

The DCH supplemental includes a replacement of \$25.5 million of tobacco settlement revenue with general fund dollars of the same amount, which reflect the reduced payment by cigarette companies to the state for the year.

The overall supplemental budget also kicks \$10 million toward Corrections for unanticipated population, fuel and utility costs.

The supplemental budget also approves \$100,000 in spending to promote the Detroit Zoological Institute – which had been a point of contention in the May supplemental as the Legislature twice had to sign off on a \$4 million appropriation to the zoo as its operations were turned over from the city to the zoological society.

The conference committee report also eliminates \$500,000 that would have gone toward a prison study project.

Still included in the omnibus bill are appropriations for the departments of Agriculture, History, Arts and Libraries, **Human Services**, Judiciary, Labor and Economic Growth, Military and Veterans Affairs, State Police and Transportation, as well as general government, which includes Attorney General, Civil Rights, Civil Service, Executive, Information Technology, Legislature, Auditor General, Management and Budget, State and Treasury.

All of those appropriations are duplicates of what has already been approved in Senate bills by conference committees.

The bill duplicates the funding for the Michigan Strategic Fund that has also been approved as part of another bill, HB 5786, which has previously been approved by a conference committee.

Published July 21, 2006

'Frank' reform: Ruling reflects FOIA weakness

A Lansing State Journal editorial

A Michigan Supreme Court ruling this week again reflects the need for the state to strengthen its Freedom of Information Act.

Citizens cannot be confident in assessing their government if the key law to ensure access to records does not cover all facets of government or is so burdened with exceptions that accountability is weakened.

In a case involving a letter between top officials at Eastern Michigan University, a court majority ruled at least parts of the letter can remain secret because they are a "frank communication" and in this case the interests of non-disclosure outweigh the value of disclosure.

But, as interpreted by this court majority, this exemption provides far too much cover for public officials - and, in fact, weakens the very purpose of FOIA: public accountability.

If frank communications are essential to government, this exemption could be written to further place the burden on officials. As the court notes, the ethos of FOIA is pro-disclosure; therefore, disclosure should be the standard, unless the government agency can prove such disclosures would make it impossible for agencies to function.

But documents that only make officials uncomfortable simply should not be kept from the public's eye.

Another blow to open government

The Kalamazoo Gazette

Friday, July 21, 2006

Once again, the Michigan Supreme Court has come out against the public's right to know what tax-paid public bodies and organizations are doing.

This week, the state's high court said no to a request by the Ann Arbor News, a sister paper of the Kalamazoo Gazette, for the court to force Eastern Michigan University to release a letter from one of EMU's vice presidents to a member of the university's Board of Regents about the construction of a new home for EMU's president.

The Ann Arbor News had been probing the construction of the \$6 million house, which, a state audit discovered, was \$2.5 million more than the EMU Board of Regents had authorized. The state also discovered EMU was using operating funds and had authorized the project without approval by the Legislature.

A 2003 letter from EMU Vice President Patrick Doyle to Regent Jan Brandon was a response to a question Brandon had about what role then-President Samuel Kirkpatrick had in the construction of the house.

The News wanted a copy of the letter, but EMU refused, saying it was exempted from the Michigan Freedom of Information Act because it included "frank communication" between a public official and a public employee.

The newspaper went to court. In a 4-3 ruling, the state Supreme Court told the News that it had no right to the letter. More encouraging, though, was the court's decision to send the matter back to Washtenaw County Circuit Court for it to determine what information in the letter must be disclosed under the Freedom of Information Act.

Public bodies in Michigan have been allowed to grow less and less transparent over the years.

The Supreme Court has ruled that tentative school labor contracts can be withheld, that internal affairs investigation records of law enforcement agencies can be withheld, that the Michigan High School Athletic Association is exempt from the Freedom of Information Act, that gun registration records can be kept secret and that public colleges and universities aren't required to hold public searches for president.

It's not surprising that courts, especially lower courts, may want to err on the side of privacy because, once information is released, there's no getting it back again.

But just as the federal government often classifies information that is, in reality, merely politically damaging, so, too, do public bodies attempt to conceal information under the privacy exemption that has little to do with privacy.

The ``frank conversation" exemption to the Freedom of Information Act is designed to ensure free communication between public officials and their employees.

But we believe that it is even more important that there be frank conversation between public officials and the public that pays them.

In the name of transparency, it is important that the courts encourage such communication as well.



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

Welfare reform pilot program will put people back to work and help Wayne County families achieve self-sufficiency

July 21, 2006

HIGHLAND PARK – Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) Director Marianne Udow and Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth Director Robert W. Swanson today showcased one of four statewide welfare reform pilot plans in Wayne County. These pilots will enable more families to achieve self-sufficiency and meet new federal work participation requirements.

“A key part of our economic plan is ensuring that every person in Michigan has the skills they need to get a good job,” said Governor Jennifer M. Granholm. “This program provides that opportunity for thousands of people currently dependent on welfare while saving the state money.”

The welfare reform pilot, called Jobs, Education and Training (JET), was developed jointly by the Michigan Department of Human Services and the Department of Labor & Economic Growth (DLEG) to help welfare recipients become self-sufficient and permanently attached to the labor force.

“The Jobs, Education and Training approach fundamentally changes the way we move families off welfare and toward self-sufficiency,” Udow said. “Instead of telling those on welfare to ‘get a job, any job,’ the program supports them in developing job skills and moving permanently off of the welfare rolls.”

Beginning in September 2004, DHS director Marianne Udow and then-DLEG director David Hollister led a broad-based welfare reform work group that developed a new approach to creating permanent work force status for DHS clients. The JET approach grew out of this work group and the pilot programs were included in the fiscal year 2006 DHS budget. The JET pilot sites are located in Kent, Oakland, Sanilac, and Wayne counties.

“JET brings together a statewide partnership between DLEG, DHS, Michigan Works! agencies and local workforce development boards that will connect individuals to the education and training resources they need to get, keep and advance in the skilled jobs that employers have now,” Robert W. Swanson, director of the Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth, said.

The JET pilots:

- Use a thorough up-front assessment and “Family Self-Sufficiency Plan” to tailor supports and services to the individual circumstances of recipient and family.
- Expand educational and training opportunities so clients gain the skills they need to get a good paying job.

-MORE-

- Focus career and technical training opportunities on jobs the Michigan economy has available (e.g., health care, construction).
- Provide supportive services when clients face serious barriers to work, with the goal of reducing/removing those barriers so clients can participate in work or work preparation.
- Provide advocacy and support for those who are making application for Supplemental Security Income.
- Extend post-employment support from 90 days to 180 days to help clients retain jobs and prepare a plan for advancement.

“The DHS welfare reform plan will meet federal work participation requirements within the federal time frame, protect the safety net, and help people become permanently attached to the labor force so they can move their families out of poverty,” said Udow. “We want to get more people working permanently in Michigan – self-sufficiency is better for families, and what is better for families is better for children.”

For more information about the Department of Human Services, go to www.michigan.gov/dhs

For more information about JET go to www.michigan.gov/jet

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